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The Captive Cubans

Fidel Castro has been alternately encouraging and stalling the transaction by which James Donovan is seeking the release of the Cuban invasion prisoners. Castro wants ransom, some \$60 million of it to be paid in food and medicines. Friends and relatives of the prisoners have been raising funds, but it is highly unlikely private sources could raise any such sum as this.

So there are rumors and reports that the Kennedy administration may put up contingency funds to supplement the ransom price the exiles' organization is trying to meet. The government denies that it is involved in the negotiations. But there is no flat statement that it might not become involved. And logic supports the conclusion heard in Congress and elsewhere that the talks with Castro have some degree of government sanction.

Even if the exile group gets enough money to buy the food and medicines, the delivery of them require the sanction if not active co-operation of the government. Another significant fact is the man involved in the mysterious negotiation. It was Donovan who arranged the deal to trade a Russian spy for the release of Francis Gary Powers, the U2 pilot. The Central Intelligence Agency was behind that trade, and CIA was heavily involved in the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs where the 1,100 prisoners were captured.

Certainly the humanitarian appeal is strong. The prisoners ought to be free. The Cuban people need food and medicine, and our quarrel is not with them but with their Communist leaders. The prisoners taken at the Bay of Pigs owe their captivity to the failure of their invasion attempt, an attempt that

failed largely, it is said, because the Kennedy administration did not provide the air cover expected.

But can a government that is steadily tightening the screws on all commerce with Cuba have a hand in giving \$60,000,000 of medicines and food? The ransom goods would be in direct conflict with moves to hamper shipping between Cuba and its principal supplier, the Communist bloc.

There is the closest kind of parallel between the current project deal and the Tractors-for-Freedom plan that failed last year. At that time President Kennedy said this nation "cannot be a party to any deal with Castro." At that time he urged individual Americans to contribute to the tractors fund. The deal fell through because Castro raised his terms.

There can be no objection now to a privately organized rescue attempt, distasteful as it may be to contribute to the Cuban dictator's blackmail. If American pharmaceutical firms want to donate medicines, that's their business. If individual Americans want to put up dollars to get the men back, so be it. But the use of governmental money, whether it comes from the CIA, our food surpluses or in any other place is distinctly something else.

There is no easy answer for the Kennedy administration. It appears to be seeking some middle ground -- a way to help the prisoners without at the same time helping Castro. That will take some doing.

It will take some doing because any governmental participation in a ransom deal will put the government in the wholly impossible situation of fighting Castro with one hand and feeding him with the other.